

STOLEN

Taken away

They must have been very quiet. We hadn't heard anything at all: no sound of a car pulling up, no crunch of footsteps on the path. They had picked their time. It wasn't the first time they had come. Platts Estate often received unwelcome attention from the Aborigines Welfare Board. This time, however, they had planned it in advance, waiting until my father was away working. They had been watching the house.

It was winter 1957, seven o'clock in the morning. The sun was up and the sounds of birds drifted down into our small kitchen. My brother Lenny was sitting on the floor, eating toast; my brothers Murray and David and I, rubbing our eyes in a state of half sleep, were waiting for mum to smear Vegemite on our bread before we dressed for school. A routine day in the Simon household.

Someone rapped loudly on the door. My mother didn't answer it. We hadn't heard anyone come up the path. The knocking got louder, and finally my mother, who was reluctant to answer any callers when my father wasn't home, opened the door and exchanged words with three people. We strained to hear what they were saying. Three men then entered the room. A man in a suit ordered my mother to pick up Lenny and give him to me. My mother started to scream. One of the policemen bent down and picked up my brother and handed him to me. My mother screamed and sobbed hysterically but the men took no notice, and forced my brothers and me into a car. My mother ran out onto the road, fell on her knees and belted her fists into the bitumen

as she screamed. We looked back as the car drove off to see her hammering her fists into the road, the tears streaming down her face. Then we saw her stand up, turn around and go back inside the house, shutting the door behind her.

In the back of the car my mind was racing. Why hadn't Dad been there to stop this? Why didn't Mum fight back? Why had she turned her back and walked inside? Why hadn't she told us to run and hide as we had been instructed to do when white men came? How could she have let this happen? Paralysing fear swept over me. I felt sick. Where were we going? Was this what had happened to the boy that went missing in the bush? Perhaps this man had come and taken him away too. Maybe the Hairy Man was true.

He wasn't the Hairy Man. His name was Mr Norris. He said nothing once we were inside the car. No explanation. No words to put our fears at bay. I knew the answers to my questions. Our mother did not want us any more. I was ten, it was the first taste of rejection, and it was by my own mother. It hurt. That three-second thought about my Mum not wanting us was to plague me for the next forty years.

Mr Norris took us to his house.

'You'll be staying the night,' he said. 'And don't misbehave.'

He said we would be staying at his house until the court case the following morning. Now panic flooded my body. What court case? Court cases were for people who did the wrong thing. What did we do wrong? The three of us older boys stood together not knowing what we were supposed to do next. Lenny must have been able to sense the distress, because he started screaming and no amount of cuddling and rocking comforted him. He wanted his mother. We all did.

'Don't worry,' I told my brothers. 'Dad 'n' Mum'll be comin' to get us.'

Mr Norris's wife seemed to be a friendly woman, but it was obvious right away that he overruled her. She looked to him for approval before coming over near me to take Lenny into her arms to calm him down. She tried her best but she wasn't his mother. He held his arms out to his brothers, crying loudly, and finally Mrs Norris passed him back to me.

It was fairly obvious that Mr Norris had no time for any of us. He told us to go out into the backyard and keep quiet. I wondered if he was actually enjoying what was happening to my brothers and me — it certainly felt like it.

At dinnertime we were told to sit down and eat the food placed before us. We just weren't hungry.

'You lot are bad and wasteful,' he said.

That didn't make us feel hungry. It made us more traumatised. Dinner over, he ordered us to our beds and his wife said a quiet goodnight to us. When we were under the covers we were told in a very stern voice to go to sleep and not to speak. I lay there terrified, not knowing whether to cry, or to yell out for Dad to come and get us. Lenny had cried himself to sleep, exhausted. Murray lay there staring up at the ceiling and David was sobbing, hard at first and then more gently until he finally fell into an uneasy sleep. My head whirled with the events of what was happening. Confusion and fear and anger mingled together, and it took a very long time before I went to sleep myself. I had dreams of being hit by Mr Norris, dreams of my mother turning her back.

A harsh voice broke into my dreams.

'Get up and get dressed,' it barked.

It was morning. But there were no bird calls, no warm kitchen, no smiling face preparing Vegemite on toast. We put our day-old clothes on and sat on the beds, staring at each other, not knowing what to say. We looked down at our feet, looked at each other and looked down at our feet again.

Norris's face was set in an early morning snarl as we entered the kitchen.

'Sit down and eat everything that is put in front of you,' he ordered.

It had been twenty-four hours since we had eaten and now we were hungry. After a quick bowl of cereal we were once again herded into the car.

'Are we bein' taken back home to Mum and Dad?' David whispered.

I looked at him and shook my head. Panic started to set in once again. Lenny, being only two, was content now that he had slept and been fed. The rest of us were sitting on the back seat with fear

growling in our stomachs and tears in our eyes. Mr Norris finally pulled up at the Newcastle courthouse and after parking the car he told us to get out and to follow him.

We were bundled into a courtroom, and there, in front of the court, were Mum and Dad, looking dejected. A man in uniform and Mr Norris sat us over to one side of the room. A man came into the court from out the back and everyone stood up as he sat down. Men in the front row were standing up and talking, saying things to the magistrate. I couldn't understand what they were talking about. Nor could I understand what the magistrate was saying. I know now that the court was accusing my father of neglecting us because he was away when the welfare came. What wasn't mentioned was that Dad was only away when he was working, and he was working to feed his family.

My mother was crying, wiping her eyes. Dad stood with his hand on her shoulder, pointing over at us. Lenny was now starting to cry as well. David looked over at Mum and seeing her distress, he cried too. Murray stared at the floor, a frozen look on his face. I was close to tears and feeling totally bewildered and powerless.

After more conversations, which I did not understand, the magistrate waved his hand at us and declared the court session finished. It was then that Mum started crying out aloud. Mr Norris and another man stood up and came over to us. I looked at Mum and Dad, waiting for them to say something. At first they were silent. Mum was looking at Dad and he was shaking his head from side to side, saying, 'No! No!' Then he started to yell at the magistrate. I thought things would be all right now; Dad was shouting and when he raised his voice, people took notice. Not these people. A policeman came and stood beside him, saying something in his ear. Mr Norris put his hand heavily on Murray's shoulder. He told the three of us to get up and walk out the front of the courthouse and get into the back of his car. My father was shouting at the magistrate and my mother was weeping on his shoulder.

Once again we were in the car with Mr Norris. Once again, driving to a destination unknown. My parents were now standing on the path in front of the courthouse. They were looking up the

road at us as the car sped away. David was crying and Murray and I were beside ourselves with fear that gnawed at the pits of our stomachs. I had just put Lenny onto the seat beside me when Mr Norris stopped up the top of Hunter Street outside a shop. He got out of the car and then put his head back in the window saying, 'Wait here, I'm just going to get some cigarettes, I won't be long, so just sit still.'

We had to move quickly. I picked up Lenny and then said to Murray, 'Grab David and run!' We got out of the car, ran around the corner and up the hill as fast as we could. There was a bus pulling up which had a sign saying 'Waratah' on its front.

The bus stopped and we boarded. The ticket collector asked for our fares. I pretended to look in my pockets.

'Lost all me money,' I told him. He smiled as he looked down at Lenny.

'Just this once,' he said.

We got off at the stop nearest to our Auntie Deb's place and told her our story. She looked anxious and said we needed to get away as fast as we could. She gave us some food and money for bus fare and told us to run and hide up in the bush until Mum and Dad came along.

We caught the bus that went to the edge of Platts Estate because I wanted to get some clean clothes for us all. By now the two youngest brothers were hungry, so I sent Murray down to the shop to buy some broken biscuits. You got more in the bag if you ask for the broken ones.

While we were waiting for Murray to come back with the biscuits, we sat down on the bench just as a blue Holden pulled up. Two policemen got out.

'G'day,' they said. 'What're your names and where you goin'?''

'I'm Billy,' I said. 'This is me brothers and we're on our way to see our Nan.'

With a smile one of them told us to jump in and they'd give us a ride down there. Not realising they would know anything about the court session, we accepted the offer. I was also relieved that I wouldn't have to carry Lenny as my arms were getting tired.

As soon as they turned the car around, I realised they had no intention of going to Nan's. Murray and I looked at each other

despairingly as the car turned into Mr Norris's street and pulled up outside his house.

'Thanks, fellas,' said Mr Norris to the police. 'I can look after them now.'

He waited until the police car had disappeared and then he pulled out a large stockwhip and cracked it, shaking it at us.

'If you run away again, you're gonna get this!'

Our parents had never hit us, so when we saw the whip poised to strike we were terrified. Mr Norris was really angry and he continued to berate us as he took the biscuits off Murray and pushed us inside the house. He shoved me so hard I wet my pants in fear. Later that day he gave us something to eat, telling us to empty our plates or else. After lunch he sent us into the room we had slept in previously and told us to stay there. I sat on the bed, trying to organise the thoughts that whirled around in my mind, and at the same time tried to reassure Murray and David that we'd be all right. Judging by the looks they were giving me I don't think I was too convincing.

A few hours later Mr Norris came to get us for dinner. He said we had to wash our hands and be quiet as we sat at the table. Mrs Norris was there at the table and she smiled and said hello. We ate our food in silence, and as soon as we finished the meal he sent us all to bed. That night we were more frightened than we had ever been before.

The next morning after breakfast it was back in the car. He didn't talk and neither did we. I didn't ask and he didn't say where we were going, but it must have been a long way as we were in the car for hours. We stared out the window at an unfamiliar landscape. There were cows in the paddocks eating green grass, sharp corners, steep hills, passing cars, and then suddenly we stopped in Taree. Mr Norris got out opened the back door. Lenny was sleeping on my lap. Waking up and seeing Mr Norris looking at him, he screamed in fright. He screamed even louder when Mr Norris picked him up and carried him into a building. Mr Norris was gone for about twenty minutes and then he was back again, only this time without Lenny. There was no explanation of the whereabouts of our brother and we were too afraid to ask. Fear settled in. We wondered what had happened to Lenny and what was going to happen to us.

Hours later we came to a place called Kinchela. It was night-time. Mr Norris drove the car through the gates and pulled up in front of a building. He again told us to stay put, while he went and spoke to a man who was waiting nearby. Minutes went by but they seemed like hours. What was this place? Would our brother join us? Was this our new home? Questions banged inside our heads.

Finally, Mr Norris handed us over to the manager. His voice was hard, his eyes cruel. It was this man and others like him, who would change my mind about how I saw life, my family, my people, the white man and the morality of mankind in general.

Had I remained at home, I would have learnt many lessons from my father as I grew up. I would have found employment, had a girlfriend, and been given all the opportunities other boys had. My future was now in the hands of strangers, and even though I didn't know it at the time, they were purposely going to make my life miserable for a long time to come. These men were about to change what should have been a normal Aboriginal youth. Nothing would ever be the same again.

The new boys

The manager, Mr Borland, came out to the car, and he and Mr Norris shook hands as if they were long-lost friends. Our plight was totally ignored as they swapped pleasantries. Then Borland ordered us out of the car and into a building. This was the place that was to be our new home, and even though I had never heard of the Kinchela Boys' Home I was sure that I wouldn't like it one bit.

Mr Borland organised all the paperwork and then said that the first thing to be done was to check out our condition. He looked us up and down then asked us our names. I gave him mine first, and then, because of a deafening silence, I told him my brothers' names as I pointed to them. Mr Borland wrote them down on three cards and three pieces of paper. Each form had a number on the top of it and he told each of us what our number was and to make sure we remembered them. Mr Borland said first up we had to have a haircut and a shower. He pointed to a nearby door and motioned us to go through it.